

The Rescue of the Chinese Rhinoceros

By L. C. HOPKINS

SOME twenty-four years ago there was carried on a high and formidable argument between two Professors of Chinese concerning the rhinoceros and his Chinese name. In the end each contestant remained, as is usual in such literary warfare or "incidents", of the same opinion still, while the third parties to the dispute finding their minds in some confusion on the matter, concluded that either Professor A was in the right, or else, perhaps, it was Professor B. And so the question rested for some years, and sleeping dogs were allowed to lie. But in due course An Yang in the Province of Honan surrendered its long hidden store of bone and tortoise-shell, inscribed with archaic characters. And on the discoveries and problems thus presented we have been browsing ever since. Among these novel forms are two, each of which is partly one and partly the other. Discoveries, because though written forms do exist, these do not descend from the archaic figures under discussion. Problems, because the equation of certain bone pictures with the exact identity of the quadrupeds indicated in the inscriptions, has hitherto been disputed or equivocal. The bone figures of both these novelties display beasts of large bulk, both have horns, and both are furnished with tails, carefully marked by trifid tufts by the scribe. In the recording entries both follow a word *chu*, meaning to chase, and those who hunted the quarry were the Yin Sovereigns of the time. Where then is the difficulty in identifying the particular species of Big Game hunted by the sporting rulers of the Shang-Yin line? Briefly, the horns in each case have been a dilemma hindering full assurance of our conclusions. And at this point it is necessary to insert a few illustrations, partly from figures cited in recent Chinese works on ancient inscribed bone fragments, and partly from certain ink squeezes, of especial value and authority, made in Peiping from animal skulls and ribs excavated at An Yang in Honan. These

were obviously trophies preserved by some royal sportsman of the Yin Dynasty, and were inscribed by a contemporaneous hand. The space available for the scribe's use was abundant on such materials, and the figure below profits by such a welcome and unchallengeable exhumation. I am much indebted to Professor Perceval Yetts for presenting me with the actual rubbing made in Peiping from the animal skull in the collection of the National Research Institute of History and Philology. Fig. 1 below is copied from this rubbing. Another and excellent reproduction of a rubbing from the same skull is shown on p. 1 of Shang Ch'êng-tso's own preface to his work, *Yin Ch'i I Ts'un*, 殷契佚存.

It is to the animal figures as displayed in the legend on this trophy of Shang-Yin Chases, that I have been able to decide in my own mind between the claims of the now extinct rhinoceros, and the wild buffalo, now only represented in China by the domesticated water buffalo of the rice-fields. The crucial passage is as follows:—

Crude and unfinished as these drawings are—the line of the underparts is omitted altogether—the salient feature of the rhinoceros, its single reverted horn, is well marked, and its blunt muzzle. Much less convincing are the counterparts of the above beast that frequent the small and fragmentary inscribed bones inquiring as to the chances of hunting on a named day, and recording, in other cases, the success



huo captured



po white



ssü rhinoceros

Fig. 1.

or otherwise of the day's sport. The inscriptions in which these examples occur, are on a minute scale, often less than one centimetre in height, and when internal graphic details are added, as in these particular instances they are, what shall it profit a horned pachyderm if he loses his stomach and gains a complex of curves and chevrons upon his head?

No wonder then if such minutiae on such a restricted scale of size have caused a certain bedevilment of interpretation and decipherment among the experts and antiquaries in China. The several figures that follow, together with the short notes to each, will, I hope, help to illustrate what is said above.



FIG. 2.

This figure, rather unusually complete and detailed, appears on Bone No. 25 in Shang Ch'êng-tso's work, *Yin Ch'i I Ts'un*.¹ The six characters still remaining visible in whole or in part, are transcribed in the second volume, thus, 貞其·逐·馬獲·*chêng ch'i · chu · ma huo*, "inquired as to ** hunting ** horses captured." The three points represent breaks in the original text caused by the fractures of the edges of the bone.

It is strange that Shang should have taken the figure in the text to be a horse, since that would imply that wild horses were to be found and hunted in Honan Province or the neighbouring Shansi or Shantung. Nor is there any trace of the tell-tale mane.



FIG. 3.

This figure is taken from an inscription on a long bone, a rib, of some large quadruped, which was excavated I presume by the Chinese Government Commission under Dr. Li Chi in Honan. The four characters of the passage extracted are in modern writing, 獲商 咒 *huo shang chih ssü*, and record the capture of a *ssü* (in my view, rhinoceros), as did the previous passage. But whereas in that the qualifying word was *po*, white, here there are two characters to be dealt with. The first is 商 *shang*, which may be taken in its ordinary usage either as a regional name (and by extension, dynastic also), or as the earlier script of the homophone 賞 *shang*, to bestow, in which sense Mr. Shang Ch'êng-tso accepts it here. The second character is an early form of

¹ 殷契佚存, 2 volumes.

a word later and still written 𪛗 *chih*, the meaning of which was unknown to the author of the *Shuo Wên*, who writes the word "wanting", 闕 *ch'üeh*, where he usually gives the sense of the character heading the entry. Mr. Shang, however, is undaunted by the lacuna. Following the, as I think, dubious guidance of homophonous syllables he arrives at the conclusion that 𪛗 *chih* meant yellow. If the four characters of the above inscription are given the values Mr. Shang attributes to them, capture, bestow, yellow, rhinoceros, I see no plausible translation possible. But if 商 *shang* was here used as a regional name, and accepting 𪛗 *chih* as yellow or brown, an English rendering as "captured a Shang-country brown rhinoceros", may pass as a tentative solution.¹



In this figure we find one variant of the type usually seen on the Honan relics, and showing that diagrammatized version of the beast making its way from the picture on the further bank to the

FIG. 4. stiff, stark character (𪛗 *ssü*) on this, a slow transition serving as a kind of purgatorial condition of survival in the literature of the Far East.

We should also notice in this figure the over-emphatic stress laid on the head and horn, and the corresponding undue reduction of the trunk and limbs to the exact conforma-

tion of a man, as then written, 𪛗. In this deformation this particular variant is aberrant and misleading, as we shall see.



Fig. 5 𪛗 is still more diagrammatic than the last, but differs by having two legs and the tufted tail shown.²


¹ See the *Yin Ch'i I Ts'un*, vol. i, p. 55, Bone No. 518.

² The bone fragment from which this figure is copied (殷虛書契 *Yin Hsu Shu Ch'i*, 前, ch. 1, p. 19) presents a singular feature. It is a moderate, irregularly broken piece of bone, inscribed with characters in what seem to be two panels, an upper and a lower, between which no direct connection can be detected. In the lower panel are two ranks of


The three figures, Nos. 3, 4, and 5, though perhaps not in each case those I should otherwise have used to illustrate this part of my paper, appear here because they are those chosen by Mr. 唐蘭 T'ang Lan to support his short but acute note on this type of archaic character, which concludes thus: "Thus then, a beast with one horn, and that horn of exceptional size, 又特大者 *yu t'ê ta chê*, should (當爲 *tang wei*) represent the form of the 兕 *ssü*, obviously and beyond question, 亦皎然無疑者也, *i chiao jan wu i chê yeh*."

So, too, what Mr. T'ang Lan, working from these archaic types, determines to be the sibilating syllable *ssü*, I, for my part, on similar grounds, claim as the outline of the quadrisyllabic quadruped, rhinoceros.

I will add only two more examples of the character under discussion, but not cited by T'ang Lan.¹

Fig. 6  stands alone near the broken edge of a bone frag-

ment, without visible context, and with blunt muzzle, complete with horn, legs, tail, and stomach.

Fig. 7  is the last in a text of probably five characters, of which the third is only partly visible owing to the broken bone edge. So far as recognized, and in modern writing, the text runs, 王逐[?]二兕, *Wang chu* [?] *erh ssü*, the King hunted — two rhinoceroses.

These seven figures will, I hope, be held to justify my belief that they portray a rhinoceros. For there are only two quadrupeds they can possibly stand for, one is the rhinoceros, the other the wild buffalo. And if as a portrait of the first, the "salient point", 特點 *t'ê tien*, as Mr. Tung Tso-pin well


five characters each, each of the lower rank being exactly aligned below its number above. And these ten are virtually identical copies of Fig. 5 above. The object and explanation of this squadron of rhinoceroses eludes us.

¹ They are from the *Y.H.S.C.* 前, pp. 46 and 47.

describes it, is not sufficiently salient, if the pictured beast does not, indeed, raise his horn on high, but allows it to trail backwards over his shoulders more than it does in nature, still less does the shape suggest the buffalo's horn advancing first laterally outward, then in a bold curve (if I may coin the word) serpenticularly upward.





I must not ignore the fact that a very different view of this series of animal forms is held by Mr. Tung Tso-pin, a well-known Chinese authority on the national antiquities. Perhaps "*has been held*" would have been more correct, for the passages on pp. 2 and 3 of Section 10 of the *Chia Ku Hsüeh*, where Mr. Tung's views are cited, are cancelled in the corrigenda, appended to the second volume, by the note 罽字誤釋當刪, *ssü tzü wu shih tang shan*.

But the net result of Tung's critical examination of the material provided by the Honan relics—he cites fifteen examples, including two of T'ang Lan's—is that they are figures of a mysterious beast named Lin, written 麟, and that this beast was a unicorn. Beyond this he does not go, nor am I concerned to discuss his arguments. They may be summed up as a conjectural identification of a misunderstood figure with a supposititious creature of beneficent disposition but indeterminate form and structure. It would lead us nowhere.

It will perhaps be well before concluding this paper, to show the reasons given by Mr. T'ang Lan for his considered opinion that the animal figures cited by him corroborate Hsü Shên's Lesser Seal version of 咒 *ssü*, viz.  (Fig. 8), and his explanation of it.

Under Fig. 8 Hsü wrote, 如野牛而青色 ** 象形, *ju yeh niu erh ch'ing sê ** hsiang hsing*,¹ "like a wild ox, dark in colour, ** a pictogram," that is, explains T'ang Lan,

¹ Before the last two characters, Tuan Yü-ts'ai in his edition has "restored" seven characters to the effect that "the hide was tough and thick and could be made into armour". T'ang Lan omits these.

the figure  of the Oracle sentences slightly changed. He continues: The *Shuo Wên* has long contained a scholiast's interpolation, 校語 *chiao yü*, reading "with head the same as in 禽 *ch'in* and 離 *li*", so that there must have been another MS. copy with a Seal form  (Fig. 9), which again is a variant of the figure  (Fig. 10). Thus then, judging by the conformation of the character, this type occurring in the oracular sentences should stand for 兕 *ssü*, that is, the *Shuo Wên*'s , there can be no doubt about it.

Mr. T'ang then cites some geographical confirmation as to the habitat and range of the *ssü* in which I need not follow him.

A few observations in conclusion. It will be noticed that the two passages cited in Figs. 1, from a skull, and No. 3 from a rib, both contain the old form of 獲 *huo*, "to capture." This is a peculiar word to use when a rhinoceros, or for that matter, a wild buffalo, is in question, and in view. I wonder if I had been one of the beaters in a Shang-Yin Royal Hunt, and had received an urgent royal command, "Go, capture that rhinoceros," how even under the spur of the most loyal devotion and the strongest language, I should have tried to do it. And further, we may wonder if these so-called "captures" were post-mortem captures, and if so, how, when, and by what means, the quarry came by its death.

Another and more pertinent question relates to the colour of the beast's coat. In the case of the skull from which Fig. 1 was copied, the word white, 白 *po*, is expressly used. In that of Fig. 3 (the inscribed rib), accepting provisionally Mr. Shang's sense of yellow for 黃 *chih*, we should read yellow or brown, as the colour of the hide.

I am much indebted to Captain Guy Dollman, of the British Museum (Natural History), for the following illuminating reply to a query I had addressed to him on this

point. He writes, "The use of the term 'White Rhinoceros' certainly seems at first glance to be curious but perhaps not more curious than the fact that the White Rhinoceros of Africa was so-called. It has probably arisen from the same source, that is through the body being heavily plastered with clay which gives these animals a white appearance."

In another letter Captain Dollman informs me that "regarding the rhinoceros we have received reports concerning a species which used to live in China during historic times. This may have been the Javan Rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros sondaicus*) or perhaps the Indian Rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*). Or it may have been a distinct species".

But of whatever species it was, it is extinct now in China, like its fellow pachyderm the elephant. Whether it was exterminated by the Shang-Yin royal hunting parties, with their predilection for blood-sports, or lost its *joie de vivre* with the slow seepage of the oncoming tide of human occupation into its haunts, we do not know. But I hope it may be granted by the readers of this paper that I have rescued the memory of the Chinese rhinoceros from complete oblivion, thanks to the excavations in Honan, and the testimony of the written letter that remains.